

REPORT FROM OTTAWA

By Gerald Waring

Environmental pollution is a subject that is being raised more and more frequently in Parliament and in the quiet councils of civil servants, and with a concern that marks it as potentially the greatest public health problem that governments ever have had to face.

And not governments alone. More accurately, all of mankind. For men who cannot be dismissed as alarmists are predicting that if the present pace of pollution of our environment continues unchecked it will destroy the fine balance achieved in eons of evolution and result in ecological disruption and disaster.

There are currently four bills on the House of Commons' calendar that deal with pollution. All are sponsored by private M.P.'s, and therefore stand little chance of being passed because (1) the time Parliament devotes to private M.P.'s bills is very limited, and (2) the government is not ready to introduce legislation that would incorporate the substance of these private bills.

One bill has been debated, but only for one hour, following which it went to the bottom of the list of 133 private bills vying for Parliament's time. Introduced by Dr. Stanley Haidasz, a Toronto Liberal M.P. who was formerly parliamentary assistant to the Minister of National Health and Welfare, it proposes to assign to that minister new responsibilities and powers to deal with aspects of air pollution over which Parliament has legal jurisdiction.

In the brief debate a leading member of the Conservative Party and another of the New Democratic Party praised Dr. Haidasz's initiative, and pledged support for Dr. Haidasz's suggestion that all the pollution bills on the calendar be sent to committee for study that logically would lead to a recommendation for legislative action. But the debate was terminated ineffectually when the bill was "talked out" by Mark Smerchanski, a mining engineer from Winnipeg who was elected to the Commons as a Liberal in 1968. "I feel we have to support industrial development," he said in a defence of what the mining industry is doing to reduce the pollution of air by effluent gases from metal refineries.

THE MOTOR CAR MENACE

Although the debate got little notice in the daily press, it did serve to capsule the problem and danger for the benefit of legislators and others farsighted enough to realize that breathable air and potable water are not inexhaustible resources.

Dr. Haidasz reported the statistical findings of various authorities:

- Since 1890 the CO₂ level of the atmosphere has risen from 290 to 315 parts per million, and is still rising.
- CO concentration of 100 p.p.m. causes 15% inactivation of hemoglobin, enough to impair judgment and skills. If you drive in rush hour traffic in

Toronto and smoke a cigarette at the same time, up to 7.9% of your hemoglobin will be ineffective.

- Combustion for heating, power generation, transportation and waste disposal in Toronto in a year produces 5.2 trillion cu. ft. of exhaust gases, with motor vehicles contributing 47% of the total. The gases contain 925,000 tons of CO, 420,000 tons of hydrocarbons, 198,000 tons of organic pollutants such as aldehydes, 130,000 tons of SO₂, 65,000 tons of oxides of nitrogen, 40,000 tons of solid particles, and 23,000 tons of such inorganic pollutants as fluorides, chlorides and sulfides.

- Motor vehicle exhausts produce benzopyrene, "one of the most potent cancer-producing agents".

Dr. Haidasz said he is greatly concerned both as a physician and as an M.P. "It has been reported that there is an increase in the number of cases of emphysema, bronchitis and lung cancer in our urban centres," he noted. "Health authorities have stated that the intensity of urbanization and industrialization producing air pollution may have a residual influence on lung cancer mortality as well as on the morbidity and mortality of people with a chronic lung disease."

The physician-M.P. deplored "inadequate research" and "lack of ambient air quality standards, effective regulations and adequate enforcement agencies" in Canada.

ECOLOGY VS. ECONOMY

Part of the reason why federal action is slow is that primary responsibility for pollution control lies with the provinces. A federal-provincial conference on the question was held in 1966, but its recommendations have not produced the kind of determined action that Dr. Haidasz and other M.P.'s demand. An effort in December to establish a Commons committee on pollution was talked out, also by a Liberal.

In that debate, the most cogent point was made by Ray Perrault, the former B.C. Liberal leader, who declared that "the smell of pollution is the smell of money". Randolph Harding, freshman N.D.P. member from Kootenay West, B.C., blamed the politicians for failure to heed scientists' warnings that "we are in danger of wiping mankind from the face of the earth". Always the politicians are given pause by industry's protests that effective measures would cost so much that industry would be priced out of its market, Mr. Harding said.

Sporadically M.P.'s egg the government to action that would require motor car manufacturers to instal exhaust devices that reduce the output of pollutants from this greatest of all sources of atmospheric contamination. The government's answer on November 27, 1967, was that it was investigating the problem jointly with the provinces. The government's answer on January 14, 1969, was that officials "are studying the evidence very carefully".

It may be that only the pressure of public opinion will bring on action. And every time an M.P. paints a word picture of a silent, polluted Earth, he helps strengthen and marshal that opinion.